

Hints from Mary Curvey at NIMH

Here are some things to keep in mind while thinking about the application itself. The reviewers rank on these 5 categories and for post-docs they'll be looking for "new" skills you want to pick up on your way to becoming an independent scientist. If the research proposed is very similar to your dissertation work, the reviewers will question the "new" training being received and it will dampen enthusiasm in the "training potential" category, just something to keep in mind.

1. Applicant - grades, awards, letters of reference (all letters need to be "outstanding". You need 1s with a smattering of 2s in the blocks.) And they will look for publications from a post-doc. It's an important element in the review.
2. Research Project - the research project should be logical, well-developed and clearly presented. It should address potential problems and alternative approaches if problems occur. Once you write it up, your sponsor needs to critically evaluate it so you can rewrite it. Do that as many times as is necessary until you have a "finely tuned" project. (If your sponsor is over committed, give it to someone else in the lab or in the dept. who'll do it for you, it's important.) If the project is over ambitious, is not hypothesis driven, has gaping holes in the literature, has methods that won't work, they'll criticize your sponsor for not giving enough time and attention to the matter and it will lower the reviewers enthusiasm for the project (and in some cases the sponsor also). Oh yes, if the project is likely to produce new and interesting information and will add to the literature that will be a great plus. What you would want the reviewers to say about your project is something like, "This is a nicely integrated series of not overly ambitious experiments, based on convincing preliminary data with a high probability of success." (It's a good idea to let the reviewers know who generated the preliminary data....you or the lab.)

You might want to check out the specific aims, background and significance, and research design and methods sections in NIAID's "hints" for R01 grantees at

<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/ncn/grants/app/default.htm>

Just remember, as a fellow you're limited to 10 pages; R01 applicants get many more, so you'll have to adjust accordingly.

3. Sponsor - is there a match between what you want to learn and the sponsor's expertise? If not, add a consultant/co-sponsor who has the expertise and include a detailed letter from that person saying what

he/she intends to teach you, how often you will meet, will it be a "hands on" experience, etc. Does the sponsor have pubs in that area, does the sponsor have funding, does the sponsor have a track record of mentoring (if not, get a co-sponsor in your research area who has a track record of funding/mentoring.) Again, NIAID's web site has some good hints on choosing a sponsor at
http://www.niaid.nih.gov/ncn/training/advice/choosing_sponsor.htm

4. Training Environment - this is the part the sponsor writes up. The reviewers are looking for a thoughtful training plan for the applicant with specific courses, specific journal clubs, specific seminars, (a sentence or two explaining how these "exercises" will complement the "new" skills you intend to pick up will go a long way), encouragement to present work either at these venues or at national or international meetings, etc., etc. You should also think about taking a course in the neurobiology of mental disorders as well as adding some professional development activities (e.g. grant-writing skills, lab management, etc.) You may also spend some time mentoring undergraduate and/or graduate students to gain experience with that component of academic life. The training plan should be "tailor made" for you. A good page and a half of a thoughtful training plan is usually well received.

Finally, a point of information for you and your mentor. As discussed above, the NIMH is now recommending that trainees and fellows receive, as part of their training, exposure to clinical concepts that are both pertinent to their research and to the mission of the NIMH. Such exposure may include opportunities like coursework, seminars, workshops, and discussions that would provide you with additional knowledge/skills to relate your basic research to the mental health issues and mental disorders that are the mission of the NIMH. I would encourage you to discuss this with your mentor; I suspect that he/she will have some ideas about how to incorporate this into your training plan.

5. Training Potential - outstanding student, outstanding research project, outstanding mentor, outstanding environment. The training potential can only be outstanding. This is how you convince the committee to give you an "outstanding" priority score. What you want the reviewers to say after they read your application is something like, these experiments are well designed, theoretically motivated, and can be successfully completed by the candidate with the help of the sponsor. Furthermore, the project is very likely to produce new and interesting information about (your field of endeavor). Given the quality of the candidate and the sponsor as well as the excellent fit between the research proposed and the environment chosen, the training potential is outstanding.

You might want to check out the Center for Scientific Review's (CSR) website (www.csr.nih.gov) to see what the reviewers are instructed to look for in an application. Look under Study Section Information

and Guidelines. Another point of information for you regarding review: Post-doc applications are now being streamlined. Please read the notice at <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-06-077.html>

These applications are very competitive so give it your best shot! Hope this helps.

Also, since the NIH Director assured the House Appropriations/Labor-HHS Subcommittee April 21, 2004 that there will be "a plain language explanation of why (each NIH research grant) is relevant to public health and what problem it is addressing," it is very important to make absolutely clear the specific ways the basic research will ultimately contribute to the understanding of mental and behavioral disorders, their prevention, or treatment. There are instructions for this in Item #17 of the Fellowship Kit (416-1).

Please omit the name of any "species" in your title. And please....have the title reflect the theme of the proposed research.